

Message Text

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PAGE 01 VALLET 02168 01 OF 02 151332Z
ACTION EUR-12

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TO AMEMBASSY BONN IMMEDIATE
INFO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8332

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VALLETTA 02168

BONN FOR ASSISTANT SECRETARY VEST FROM AMBASSADOR

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PEPR, MT, UK
SUBJECT: MINTOFF'S ACTION AGAINST BRITISH BROADCASTING
- FACILITY

1. AS BACKGROUND FOR WHATEVER DISCUSSIONS YOU HAVE WITH YOUR EUROPEAN COUNTERPARTS ON MALTA, YOU SHOULD HAVE FOLLOWING INFO ON AN INTERESTING DEVELOPMENT THIS WEEK.

2. MY UK COLLEAGUE BRIEFED NATO AMBASSADORS HERE TODAY ON MINTOFF'S IRRITATION WITH BRITISH PRESS AND BBC, WHICH RESULTED IN SUSPENSION OF BROADCASTING AT MIDNIGHT LAST NIGHT OF BRITISH FORCES BROADCASTING SERVICE (BFBS) IN MALTA, WHICH IS A LOCAL RADIO FACILITY PROVIDING NEWS AND MUSIC TO LOCALLY STATIONED UK FORCES. YOUR BRITISH COUNTERPARTS WILL HAVE THE FULL DETAILS.

3. ESSENCE OF MATTER, ABOUT WHICH WE REPORTED TO DEPARTMENT EARLIER IN WEEK, IS THAT MINTOFF, IRRITATED BY ARTICLES IN BRITISH PRESS ABOUT QADHAFI VISIT HERE AND BY FAILURE BY BBC TO BROADCAST A LENGTHY INTERVIEW TAPED WITH MINTOFF LAST MARCH, SERVED NOTICE ON HMG THAT UNLESS BBC

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PAGE 02 VALLET 02168 01 OF 02 151332Z

UNDERTOOK "REDRESS" BY BROADCASTING "THE VIEWS OF THE MAJORITY IN MALTA" BEFORE THE END OF THIS WEEK, THE BFBS MUST CEASE BROADCASTING. IN TELLING PARLIAMENT ABOUT HIS ACTION, MINTOFF ALSO SAID THAT UNLESS THE BRITISH WERE "CAREFUL," HE WOULD TAKE FURTHER STEPS, INCLUDING POSSIBLY ORDERING THEIR FORCES TO LEAVE MALTA BEFORE THE EXPIRATION OF THE MILITARY FACILITIES AGREEMENT (MFA) ON MARCH 31,1979.

THIS LATTER THREAT, HOWEVER, WAS NOT CONVEYED FORMALLY TO HMG.

4. BRITISH CAN TELL YOU OF EFFORTS THEY MADE DURING THE WEEK TO HELP MINTOFF FIND HIS WAY OUT OF THE CORNER INTO WHICH HE HAD PUT HIMSELF. THEY ALSO OF COURSE EMPHASIZED TO MINTOFF THAT HMG HAD NO EDITORIAL CONTROL OVER BBC AND THAT IN ANY EVENT, THE LOCAL BFBS HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH THE BBC BUT WAS A BRITISH GOVERNMENT INSTRUMENTALITY PROVIDED FOR AND PROTECTED BY THE MFA. TO THIS MINTOFF RESPONDED THAT HE HAD "NO QUARREL WITH HMG" BUT COULD NOT ACCEPT THE ARGUMENT THAT BFBS WAS IN ANY WAY SEPARATE FROM THE BBC. AT ONE POINT, FOREIGN SECRETARY ABELA SAID TO BRITISH HIGH COMMISSIONER THAT IF BRITS CHOSE TO REGARD CLOSING OF BFBS AS A VIOLATION OF THE MFA AND "THEN CHOSE TO TAKE THEIR FORCES OUT EARLY, SO BE IT."

5. THE UPSHOT OF BRITISH EFFORTS TO AVOID A CRUNCH WERE TO NO AVAIL, WITH RESULT THAT BFBS WAS SHUT DOWN BY BRITISH AT MIDNIGHT LAST NIGHT. THIS MORNING UK HIGH COMMISSIONER DELIVERED A NOTE OF PROTEST TO FOREIGN SECRETARY ABELA NOTING THAT HMG MUST REGARD THIS ACTION AS A BREACH OF PROVISIONS FOR THE BFBS IN THE MFA, REAFFIRMING THAT HMG HAS NO EDITORIAL CONTROL OVER BBC, AND THAT ON INSTRUCTION OF MINISTERS, UKHC ASKED THAT ACTION AGAINST BFBS BE RESCINDED.

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PAGE 03 VALLET 02168 01 OF 02 151332Z

6. UKHC IS NOT SURE WHAT FURTHER ACTION HMG MAY BE CONSIDERING. IN PART IT WILL DEPEND ON HOW MINTOFF PLAYS THE ISSUE LOCALLY, WHICH IS NOT YET CLEAR, AND ALSO ON WHETHER MALTESE HIGH COMMISSIONER IN LONDON PICKS UP BBC'S OFFER, CONVEYED YESTERDAY, TO TALK IN LONDON. UKHC SENSES AN ATTITUDE OF FIRMNESS IN LONDON BUT AT THE SAME TIME NO DESIRE TO USE THIS ISSUE TO CONTRIBUTE TO ANY WORSENING OF THE SITUATION.

7. BASIC QUESTION IS WHAT MINTOFF'S REAL PURPOSES ARE, ABOUT WHICH NONE OF US IS ALL THAT SURE. IF HE HAD WANTED TO RESOLVE THIS AS YET RELATIVELY MINOR FLAP, HE COULD HAVE FOUND WAYS TO DO SO. INSTEAD HE LET IT PROCEED TO THIS FRONTAL ACTION AGAINST THE BFBS AND TO WHAT CAN BE SAID TO BE A VIOLATION OF THE MFA AND THUS AN ACTION THAT COULD JEOPARDIZE THE FINAL RENTAL PAYMENT DUE MINTOFF IN OCTOBER UNDER THE MFA.

8. HE COULD HAVE ONE OR MORE OF SEVERAL PURPOSES. IT COULD BE SIMPLY REAL IRRITATION WITH THE FOREIGN PRESS, COMPOUNDED BY FRUSTRATIONS IN GETTING THE RESPONSES FROM THE EUROPEAN DIALOGUE THAT HE WANTS. IT COULD BE A TACTIC

TO ADD TO PRESSURES ON THE EUROPEANS TO GET ON WITH THE DIALOGUE. IT COULD BE A DIVERSION FOR PUBLIC OPINION LOCALLY, WHERE THERE IS SOME INCREASE IN PUBLIC CRITICISM OVER MINTOFF'S HANDLING OF FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC ISSUES.

9. OR IT COULD BE RELATED TO THE LIBYAN OPTION. THERE IS NO EVIDENCE YET OF ITS BEING LINKED TO QADHAFI'S RECENT VISIT, OTHER THAN THE TIMING - THE CRUNCH FOLLOWING ALMOST DIRECTLY ON THE VISIT. MINTOFF DID WARN PUBLICLY IN PARLIAMENT OF FURTHER ACTIONS, INCLUDING POSSIBLE EARLY UK FORCES DEPARTURE, IF BBC DID NOT SHAPE UP. THE UKHC HAS HEARD SEVERAL RUMORS IN THE LOCAL GOSSIP CIRCUIT ABOUT

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PAGE 01 VALLET 02168 02 OF 02 151335Z
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 02 OF 02 VALLETTA 02168

AUGUST 1 AS "A DATE BY WHICH TIME ALL BRITISH FORCES WILL HAVE LEFT."

10. PERHAPS MORE SIGNIFICANT, AS EVIDENCE OF FURTHER PRESSURE ON THE EUROPEANS OR AS INDICATION OF A REAL MOVE TOWARD THE LIBYAN OPTION, A SUBSTANTIAL GOM DELEGATION LEFT FOR LIBYA YESTERDAY, INCLUDING THE MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE, (A HARD NOSED MLP TYPE), ATTORNEY GENERAL MIZZI, THE DEPUTY POLICE CHIEF, AND THE AFM COMMANDER, BRIGADIER GERA. LATTER IS VERY INTERESTING, IN LIGHT OF QADHAFI'S PUBLIC OFFER WHILE HERE TO PROVIDE ARMS FOR MALTA'S DEFENSE.

11. ALL OF THIS BEARS CAREFUL WATCHING, BUT MY NATO COLLEAGUES AND I ARE AGREED THAT FOR THE MOMENT WE SHOULD KEEP OUR COOL AND SEE WHAT FURTHER EVIDENCE THERE IS FROM MINTOFF HOW FAR HE INTENDS TO CARRY THIS. WE SEE NO REASON TO CONTRIBUTE TO HIS PRESSURE TACTICS BY OVER-REACTION.

12. ADDENDUM: MY ITALIAN COLLEAGUE HAS JUST TOLD ME OF AN APPROACH BY THE ITALIAN AMBASSADOR TO YOU IN THE DEPARTMENT AND YOUR RESPONSE TO HIM THAT HE HAD RAISED THE ISSUE OF MALTA (NOTING YOUR PRESENCE IN BONN) WITH THE RIGHT MAN, AT THE RIGHT TIME, AT THE RIGHT PLACE. I AGREE WITH THAT.

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PAGE 02 VALLET 02168 02 OF 02 151335Z

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